

## A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO WORD FORMATION PROCESSES IN ENGLISH

ADE ADEJUMO & NIYI OSUNBADE

Department of General Studies, Ladoké Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria

### ABSTRACT

This article fore-grounds the importance of the word as the building block by the language. It then position that a learner can only start the process by maintaining a language through a proper grasp by its lexical items. An exposure to the processes involved in the formation of words is a right step in language pedagogy. Since English is the language of instruction in Nigeria, this paper provides a crucial insight into word formation process in the language.

It submits that the adequate knowledge of this process will not only assist the learners in their education engagements, fault also aid in enriching their vocabulary and assist there to use words more creatively.

**KEYWORDS:** Word Formation in English, English Learning

### WORD FORMATION IN ENGLISH

#### INTRODUCTION

Word formation is conceived of as the process by which words are brought into existence. This suggests that words do not exist in a vacuum; they are usually composed. Essential to this composition are morphemes, which are “the minimal units of grammatical analysis in all languages” (Lyons 1979:200). In other words, structurally speaking, a word is located within morphemes. As a result, a large number of English words are formed through affixation and other word formation processes such as blending, clipping, compounding, etc.

#### Word Formation Processes

As pointed out above, words are usually formed in English through affixation, blending, compounding, clipping, abbronymy, neologism and idiomaticity. Our consideration of word formation shall therefore be from these viewpoints.

#### Affixation

We hinted earlier that a morpheme is the smallest unit of grammatical analysis. That is, it is the smallest meaningful unit of language. This implies that the morpheme ranks as the lowest in the hierarchical representation of grammatical units. This is shown as thus:

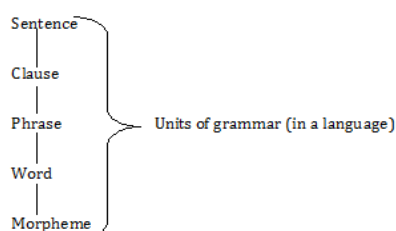


Figure 1

Essentially, the sentence ranks as the highest and the morpheme as the lowest unit, whether looked at from the ascending or descending order.

A morpheme could be free/root or bound. It is free when it can stand alone and be meaningful. In this regard, a free morpheme is equivalent of a word in its un affixed form (i.e. equivalent of a simple word). Examples are 'come', 'bad', 'sing', 'read', 'write', 'form', 'accept', etc. On the other hand, a morpheme is bound when it depends on the root before its meaning could be fully realized. Examples of these include: 'un-', '-able', '-s', 'mis-', 'ation', etc. To be capable of performing any function therefore, a bound morpheme is usually affixed/joined to the free morpheme, and this process is known as AFFIXATION (i.e. the joining of bound morphemes) to the free one (s).

Two types of affixation exist with respect to the English word: prefixation and suffixation, and any word formed through either of these is technically known as a complex word. Also, affixation could further be divided into inflectional and derivational affixation. All these are discussed in turn below.

### Prefixation

Prefixation is the adjoining of a prefix to the free morpheme. A prefix is a bound morpheme affixed to the beginning of a word. The word 'prefixation' itself is morphologically realized from 'prefix' (a bound morpheme affixed to the beginning of a word) + 'action' (the act of). It therefore refers to the act of placing a bound morpheme at the beginning of a word. The following words comprise prefixes in their initial positions.

- Misdirect
- Disapprove
- Pro- authority
- Impossible
- Pseudo- lover

Note that every prefix usually has a meaning and an associated word class. An illustrative tabulation of the prefixes in the above examples is given below below:

**Table 1**

1	Prefixes	Meaning	Word class	Examples
2	Mis-	wrongly	verb	misdirect
3	Dis-	to deprive of	Verb	disapprove
4	Im-	the opposite of	adjective	impossible
5	pseudo	False	noun	Pseudo-lover

### Suffixation

Suffixation refers to the placing of a bound morpheme (suffix) at the end of a word. The name derives from the morphological realization: suffix+ ation; where 'suffix' refers to the bound morpheme usually placed at the end of the root, and '-ation' implies 'the act of', example, the bound morphemes '-able', 'ish', '-less', 'er', '-s' in the following words are suffixes:

- Knowledgeable

- Childless
- Ruler
- Reddish
- Concept

These are also tabularized below, with consideration for their meanings and word classes to which they belong:

**Table 2**

	Suffixes	Meaning	Word class	Examples
1	-able		adjective	Knowledgeable
2	-less	Without	adjective	childless
3	-er	Agentive	noun	ruler
4	-ish	Somewhat	adjective	Reddish
5	-s	Plural	noun	Concept

It is important to point out that suffixes generally have the tendency to either change or retain word classes. In examples 1-3 above for instance, the addition of the suffixes brings about changes in the word classes. This is demonstrated below:

- ‘Knowledgeable’ is a noun and the addition of the suffix ‘-able’ transform the word into an adjective: Knowledge (noun)- knowledgeable (adjective).
- ‘Child’ is a noun and the addition of the suffix ‘-less’ also changes it into an adjective.
- Child (noun) – childless (adjective).
- ‘Rule’ is a verb and with the addition of the suffix ‘-er’ , it transforms into a noun: Rule (verb) –ruler (noun)

However, the classes of the words in examples 4 and 5 remain unchanged, despite the addition of the suffix in each case:

- Red (adjective) –reddish (adjective)
- Concept (noun) concepts (noun)

### **Inflectional Affixation**

An inflectional affixation is one that does not normally result in change of word class. It thus demonstrate that some affixes have the tendency of retaining the classes of words to which they are affixed. Some examples are:

**Table 3**

	Word	Inflected Form (s)	Original Class	New Class
1	Dog	dogs/dog's/dogs'	noun	noun
2	Go	goes/went/gone/going	verb	verb
3	Bad	worst/worse	adjective	adjective
4	She	Her/hers	pronoun	pronoun
5	Intelligently	more/most intelligently	adverb	Adverb

As shown in the examples above, the parts of speech that have the tendency to be inflected in English are nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns.

### Derivational Affixation

Affixation is derivational when it results in change in word class or meaning of a word. This implies that there are many prefixes and suffixes that can be added to a root word to change its meaning or its word class, especially in English, some examples are given below, with emphasis on how they are used in the process of word formation, and they are cover categories of derivational affixation:

- Class changing derivations

- For verb formation

The suffixes ‘-ize’, ‘-ify’ can be added to nouns and adjectives,

- Legal (adjective) – legalize (verb)
- Beauty (noun)- beautify (verb)

- For noun formation

The word endings ‘-er’ ,’-ment’ and ‘-action’ can be added to verbs to form nouns, e.g.

- Drive (verb) – drive (noun)
- Amaze (verb) –amazement (noun)
- Admire (verb)-admiration (noun)

The suffixes ‘-ity’ and ‘-ness’ can also be added to adjective to form nouns, e..

- Odd (adjective)-oddity (noun)
- Happy (adjective) – happiness (noun)

- For adverb formation

The suffix ‘-ly’ is often added to most adjective to realize adverbs, e.g.

- Quick (adjective) – quickly (adverb)
- Stupid (adjective) –stupidly (adverb)

- For adjective formation

Adjectives are normally formed either by adding any of the suffixes ‘-y’, ‘-c’, ‘-ical’, ‘-ful’, ‘-less’ to many nouns, or by adding ‘-able’ to many verbs, e.g.

- |                  |   |                         |
|------------------|---|-------------------------|
| • Bush (noun)    | - | bushy (adjective)       |
| • Atom (noun)    | - | atomic (adjective)      |
| • Grammar (noun) | - | grammatical (adjective) |

- pain (noun) - painful (adjective)
- child (noun) - childless (adjective)
- wash (verb) - washable (adjective)
- Meaning changing derivations

These generally border on the change of meaning of a word rather than the word class. Some examples are:

- Antenatal
- Impossible
- Unhappy

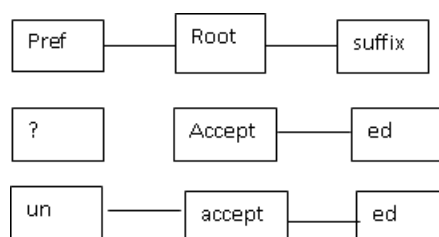
Note that in (1) above, the prefix 'ante-' has changed the meaning of the word from 'birth' to 'before birth'; and in (2) and (3) the prefixes 'im' – and 'un' – lend opposite meanings to the words to suggest 'not possible (impossible) and 'not happy' (unhappy) respectively.

Having considered the word in terms of their morphological compositions, it is also important to examine how these can give us access to the internal components of words. That is, it is necessary to briefly consider how words can be segmented morphemically in English.

### Word Segmentation

The view that a morpheme has a root and an affix (a prefix and suffix) can be represented in two ways (Odebunmi, 2001). These are:

- By the use of (+) notation : (pref) +root + (suffix), e.g
  - Un+ accepted = unaccepted
  - Accept+ed = accepted
- Through Box Analysis



**Figure 2**

Note that the implication in either case is that the root is an obligatory (compulsory) morpheme in a word while the affixes are optional. For instance, the question mark (?) in the box analytic method above shows that 'accepted' has no prefix.

However, not all English words lend themselves to easy morphological segmentation. Some words present problems of segmentation, e.g the irregular plural nouns such as men, children; verbs such as went, took, would; irregular

comparatives and superlatives such as better, best, worse, worst, etc. To give a morphological breakdown of such words, certain rules of the grammar of English must be taken into consideration. For instance, 'men' is inflected for plurality, 'went', 'took', 'would'; for tense, and better for comparativeness. The word then be analysed thus:

- Man+s = men
- Go+ed = went
- Take+ed = took
- Will+ed = would
- Good + comp = better

Also, some English words pose greater problems of segmentation, as they defy the general rule that a word must have a root form. Some examples of such words include 'retain', 'conceive', 'retrieve', etc. Given that the morphemic breakings of these words will not lead us to the meanings of the words, such words are better left unsegmented.

### Compounding

Compounding is the process of forming words. It involves the combination of two or more words to form words known as compounding. This may be done with or without hyphenation, and the compounds realized generally result in distinct meanings. Some examples include

Blackboard

Father-in-law

Sugarcane

As these examples reveal, compounds words differ in forms; they may be solid (e.g. blackboard), hyphenated (e.g. father-in-law), or two-word (e.g. sugar cane). These forms thus show the normal orthographic representations of compound words.

### Blending

This is the process involved in the formation of a single word from a combination of syllabus from two free words. That is, in blending, two free forms lose one or more of their syllables in the process of forming a single word, and the syllables retained in each word are then combined to form this single word. Some common examples of blends are:

- abbreviation + acronym = abbronym
- fact + fiction = faction
- smoke + fog = smog
- breakfast + lunch = forex
- breakfast +lunch = brunch

In the formation of ‘abbronym’ in (i) above ‘abb’ is taken from ‘abbreviation’ and ‘ronym’ from ‘acronym’; in (ii) ‘faction’ is formed through the selection of ‘fa’ from ‘fact’ and ‘ction’ from ‘fiction’. Also, ‘smog’ is formed by the combination of ‘smo’ and ‘g’ selection and ‘fog’ respectively; ‘forex’ is realized via the joining of ‘for’ of ‘foreign’ to ‘ex’ of exchange; and ‘brunchi’ is formed by the selection of ‘br’ from ‘breakfast’ and ‘unch’ from ‘lunch’.

### Clipping

A clip has been referred to by Odebunmi (2001:33) as “a shortened form of a longer word. this suggests therefore that a bi/polysyllabic word is usually shortened with a (characteristic) retention of its structural nomenclature and meaning. A clip is however usually employed in formal contexts (a) as a marker of intimacy between the user and the audience, and (b) to achieve economy of words. Examples of clips includes:

- **Paper:** clipped from ‘newspaper’
- **Mag:** clipped from ‘ magazine’
- **Mac:** clipped from ‘mackintosh’ (i.e. raincoat)
- **Disco:** clipped from ‘discotheque’ (i.e. a place where people dance to recorded popular music)
- **Phone:** clipped from ‘telephone’

### Abbronymy

The term ‘abbronyms’ was coined by Odebunmi (1996) to explain abbreviation and acronyms. The coinage was occasioned by the discovery that it is not easy to distinguish between an abbreviation and an acronym. In fact, most scholars have treated the two concepts in an overlapping manner. That is, in such a way that one is made to include the other (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, Macdonald 1974, etc). Hence, with consideration for the definitions of the two terms (abbreviation and acronyms) therefore, abbronyms have been defined as “letter representations of a group of letters, words or phrases, which may or may not be pronounceable as English words” (Odebunmi 2001: 35). The formation of abbronyms is thus technically known as abbronymy. Examples of abbronyms are:

Abbronyms	Full forms
• LAUTECH:	Ladoke Akintola University of Technology
• ECT:	Electro-convulsive therapy (i.e. electric shock therapy)
• EEC:	European Economic Community
• INEC:	Independent National Electoral Commission
• DI:	Dis Harrowing and Riding
• TB:	Tuberculosis

Two types of abbronyms can be identified in English, as the above examples reveal: simple and complex abbronyms. The simple abbronyms are those having structures that are easily predictable from the initial letters of their words or phrases whether with or without function/grammatical words. Note that examples (i) – (iv) above are simple

acronyms – each is predictably formed from the initial letters of its words. The complex ones, on the other hand, are those whose structures are not easily predictable from their complete forms. In this category are examples (v) and (vi).

### Neologism / Coinage

This refers to the process of creating new words or using existing ones with new, distinct meanings. Generally, it exposes the dynamic nature of language. In English for instance, vocabulary expands both in the first and second language contexts to reflect: (a) change in social outlook, (b) scientific discoveries and technological innovations as well as other forms of development, or (c) the inadequacy of existing words to express new ideas or events. Examples of coinages include: ‘bomb’, ‘sim’, ‘wave’, ‘jeep’, etc. which are occasioned by certain scientific inventions; and AIDS, HIV, PHCN, NOLA, etc, which came to existence to describe some forms of development in human societies.

Essentially, English words are often coined through blending, acronymy, analogical creativity, etc.

### Back Formation

Similar to clipping, this process also involves shortening a longer word. Specifically, it involves a creation of a shorter word from a longer one by a subtraction strategy. However, basically, *back forms* have their root in agentive abstract nouns, and are turned into verbs. Such a derivation therefore usually results in structural transformation as well as change in the meaning of a word. The following examples can be considered:

- Beg: from ‘begger’ (agentive)
- Type: from ‘typist’ (agentive)
- Approve: from ‘approval’ (abstract noun)
- Rule: from ‘ruler’ (agentive)
- Sing: from ‘singer’ (agentive)
- Teach: from ‘teacher’ (agentive)
- Suggest from ‘suggestion’ (abstract noun)

### Idiomacity

In idiomacity, the point in the lexical expansion of English words is noted. An idiom is a word, e.g. ‘point black’ (plainly), ‘tall order’ (difficult thing to do), etc, or a fixed group with a special meaning. When an idiom is a group of words rather than a single word, its meaning is always different from the meanings of the individual words in it. Sometimes, the meaning of such an idiom can be guessed from the meaning of one of the words, e.g. to live in the lap of luxury (to live in a very luxurious way; something to do with luxury). Usually, however, the meaning of an idiom is completely unpredictable from any of the separate words of which it comprises, e.g.

Bongo was over the moon about her exam result (she was extremely happy).

Generally, idioms can be figurative expressions, e.g. ‘piece of cake’ (metaphor: very easy), ‘as clean as a whistle’ (smile: perfectly); pairs of words, e.g. ‘staff and nonsense’ (that’s untrue or a stupid idea). ‘sixes and sevens’ (in confusion), ‘chapter and verse’ (factors to prove one’s answers); or phrasal verbs, e.g. ‘put up with’ (tolerate), ‘chicken



out of (to decide not to do something as a result of fear), etc. As the examples here have shown, when idioms are phrasal verbs, they usually appear as a combination of verbs and prepositions having meanings that cannot be predicted from the orthographic representation of the words or expressions. Also, some sayings have been regarded as idioms in English, e.g. 'swings and roundabouts' as in: my fear is that it's a bit of a swings and roundabouts situation, 'beat about the bush', 'between the devil and the deep sea', etc.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, word formation has been discussed with consideration for the different procedures involved in the formation of the English words. Essentially, it is shown that the vocabulary of English expands through the different processes examined to justify the creative potentials of the English language. Apart from mastering these words formation with their examples, learners can generate their own examples and use them creatively.

## REFERENCES

1. Koveeses, Zoltan and Peter Szabo (1986), Idioms: a view from Cognitive Semantics', in applied Linguistics 17.
2. Longman Dictionary of Cotemporary English.
3. Lyons, J. (1979). *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Odebunmi, A. (1996), "Abbreviation and Acronyms in MESTA Texts" in Adegbija and Ofuja (eds) *English language and communication skills for Medical , Engineering science, technology and agriculture Students*, Ilorin: The English Language Outer Cycle.
5. Odebunmi, A. (2001) *the English Word and Meaning: An introduction Text*, Ogbomoso: Critical Sphere.
6. Wales, K. (1989). *A Dictionary of stylistics*, London : Longman Group Ltd.

